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- Of 117 public schools, 102 were academic “failures” by any number of measures and were struggling to improve academic performance to avoid state takeover.
- Seventy-five percent of eighth-graders scored below state averages and had failed to reach basic proficiency in English.
- Dropout rates were the seventh highest in the United States and four times the Louisiana average.
- With ten superintendents in ten years, the district lacked consistent leadership and direction.
- Decades of neglect and mismanagement had created both a budget shortfall and serious debt load for the parish school board.

For years, New Orleans had a two-tiered K-12 educational system: one for the haves and one for the have-nots. More often than not, students in the lower socioeconomic neighborhoods in the city were severely underserved and provided with a low-quality education. Before Katrina, the state of Louisiana developed a Recovery School District to take command of the five lowest-performing schools. After Katrina, the remainder of the 102 failing schools were put under the auspices of the state-run district.

When schools began re-opening in November 2005, each school reached its full capacity within two weeks of opening. Twenty-five of the 117 schools reopened, serving 12,500 students—which represents only 20 percent of the pre-Katrina student population. Of the 25 schools that opened in the spring 2006 semester, 18 were charters, three were run by the state and four were run by the local school board.

The U.S. Department of Education and federal government continue to provide assistance to help our city recover and get families back on their feet. In addition to restart aid, the Department of Education provided more than \$20 million through a special charter school grant to Louisiana, enabling numerous public schools in New Orleans to reopen as charter schools, expediting children's education and the region's recovery. Thanks to these resources, New Orleans has an unprecedented opportunity to transform its public education system.

Following Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin formed the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission, a collection of seven committees charged with creating a master plan to rebuild New Orleans. A major piece of that work involves rebuilding New Orleans public schools, and I was asked to chair the committee leading the development of plans to not only rebuild but repair the long-troubled public school system.

The Education Committee's mission was to create an educational system that distinguishes New Orleans in a positive way, attracting both families and businesses to the city. The members of the committee were dedicated to developing a plan for a school system that will serve as a model for schools in the 21st century. To accomplish this great task, it led a comprehensive process to develop a transformational plan for the New Orleans school system. We received input from a diverse group of more than 1,500 students, parents, teachers, business leaders and community members from New Orleans to ensure the plan represented the voice of our city. Additionally, education experts from around the world provided insights into what has worked in high-performing schools with similar students and similar socioeconomic factors. Using this extensive research, the Education Committee developed a plan to fundamentally change the way we run our schools. In January, the Education Committee presented a blueprint for reinventing New Orleans' public school system. There is great hope for this plan, and recognition by everyone involved that we have a rare opportunity to turn things around.

Among the plans and goals:

- Delivering learning and achievement for all students, regardless of race, socioeconomic class or where they live in New Orleans, with the goal of graduating all

students ready for college or the workplace. New Orleans public school students are 96 percent African American, and three-quarters of them qualify for free or reduced-price lunch programs. These facts should have absolutely no bearing on the quality of the education they receive or the opportunities that education will afford them.

- Developing a new school-focused philosophy that empowers the schools to make more of their own financial and administrative decisions (including time, money and people) rather than relying on a central oversight board or central office.
- Establishing a new Educational Network Model that organizes schools into small groups, or networks, to provide support, foster collaboration and ensure accountability.
- Encouraging new partnerships with business, faith-based and community groups to develop programs for learning enrichment and emotional and psychological well-being.

The Education Committee's recommendations are designed around students and schools and provide more flexibility, options and accountability than ever before in order to drive student learning and achievement. We can take advantage of this opportunity to systemically transform the New Orleans public school system, which can be used as a model for other urban school districts.

## **THE CHALLENGES**

We have a unified vision for what the New Orleans public school system should look like. Our challenge as we move into the fall, when we expect up to 50 percent of our pre-Katrina public school students to return, is to make sure that schools are reopened in accordance with that long-term plan.

There are two key challenges New Orleans faces as it reopens and rebuilds its public school system.

First, the results of an extensive demographic study places fall student enrollment projections between 28,500 and 34,000. These statistics, and the fact that each school opened in spring 2006 was filled to capacity shortly after opening, substantiate the need for more schools in New Orleans for the 2006-07 school year. In the upcoming school year, the Recovery School District and Orleans Parish School Board plan to open a total of 56 schools, with a mix of charter, state-run, and district-run schools.

Roughly 60 percent of schools will be charters, with some operating independently and others forming groups (e.g., the Algiers Charter School Association). The charter schools have provided both the state and the school board with an expedient way to open schools and address a legacy of underperformance, while keeping operators free from past obstacles such as a bloated central office and the local school board's collective bargaining agreement. However, there are a number of drawbacks to having a large majority of charter schools, including the fact that it is difficult for individual schools to coordinate administrative activities and other shared services. Probably most concerning of all is that charter school performance is highly variable and there is not another school

district in the United States where the majority of schools are charters. In addition, because of the highly fragmented governance structure, there is confusion over which entity has oversight for which schools and how that oversight will be achieved, which threatens to hamper recovery.

Other challenges must be overcome before being able to open this many schools in the fall:

- Of the schools that will be opening for the first time since Katrina, many have facilities in urgent need of repair but are without sufficient funding or time in which to do so. Ongoing discussions between the school oversight groups, FEMA representatives and insurance carriers have resulted in delays to the work that needs to be done in order to reopen the schools in September. Obviously, facility remediation must take place before students are allowed back into these damaged buildings.

- A major hurdle for reopening schools in the fall is teacher recruitment and retention. The state's attention to the quality of teachers in our public schools is a long-needed step. However, New Orleans must convince good teachers that we are seriously committed to public education in order to get them here. And we cannot attract high-caliber teachers—or any teachers at all—as long as the city's housing stock remains depleted. There is very little affordable housing in which our teachers can live.

- Students who were already from two to four grade levels behind their age groups pre-Katrina have experienced great trauma, and many did not attend school last year at all, indicating a need for mental health services and special programs to close achievement gaps.

- Since the majority of child care centers haven't reopened since Hurricane Katrina, I am advocating the design and implementation of a universal pre-kindergarten program (for newborns to 4-year-olds) based on best practices for early childhood. Research demonstrates that pre-K programs produce persistent gains on achievement test scores, along with fewer occurrences of being held back a grade. The benefits of early childhood education cross all economic and social lines, but the most significant gains are noted among children from families with the lowest income levels and the least amount of formal education.

So, getting more schools open (with remediated facilities, high-quality teachers and principals, and well-adjusted students) is the first key challenge for rebuilding New Orleans' public school system. While the Recovery School District's plan covers a number of these issues, it is critical that they are immediately addressed and adequately funded in all schools in the system.

The second challenge will be to form a coordinated response and oversight mechanism for the schools in Orleans Parish. I believe the lack of a single oversight body is one of the biggest hurdles to the recovery and transformation of our public school system. There are multiple governing bodies responsible for making decisions—what the repopulation rate is in different parts of the parish, for example, and what schools are needed in response to that repopulation. These governing bodies include the Orleans Parish School Board, the Recovery School District, and the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. We are also faced with the challenge of having individual charter

school boards and authorizers. Immense coordination in the short and long terms and a shared vision are the only ways to ensure success as public education in Orleans Parish is rebuilt.

I strongly endorse the formation of a single oversight body, similar to Philadelphia's School Reform Commission, whose sole focus would be on educational transformation in Orleans Parish. Overseeing all Orleans Parish public schools, it would harness the power of the individual entities behind a unified effort to meet our short-term goals and long-term vision for better schools in New Orleans. Board members would operate at the governing and accountability level, not the execution level. A key emphasis should be on aligning focus on student achievement, not politics, and maintaining stability to consistently execute the plan over the next five to ten years.

This organization could serve to:

- Coordinate the multiple governing bodies over New Orleans schools, providing direction and accountability;
- Streamline decision-making and prevent duplication of effort and cost;
- Ensure the credibility and legitimacy of the rebuilding process by providing an unbiased oversight function; and
- Represent the best interests of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana as a whole—and, by doing so, the best interests of our children.

We have been given a rare opportunity by Hurricane Katrina to transform New Orleans schools for the benefit of our students and the entire state. To ensure that we do not squander this opportunity, we need to quickly hire—and fairly compensate—a world-class educational leader with the experience and energy to serve as superintendent for all of the public schools in our school system. This person should be charged with:

- Overseeing all New Orleans schools, including those run by the Recovery School District and the Orleans Parish School Board;
  - Securing funds for rebuilding;
  - Attracting and developing strong educators at every level, beginning immediately; and
  - Defining instructional and performance standards, as well as accountability systems.
- Supporting charter schools by forming networks to facilitate communications between schools and launching a shared-service organization, to create economies of scale not available to individual charter schools.

Given sound financial management, dedicated leadership and a spirit of cooperation among all members of our community, the outlook for the Orleans Parish public school system is brighter than it has been in many, many years. It will require vigilance and diligence on everyone's part to ensure that we continue to make progress toward the long-term vision that has been developed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Repaired levees and rebuilt homes and businesses are things New Orleans needs in order to survive in the short term. But it is through its system of education at all levels that the city can achieve the substantive change, success and energy that it needs to become a healthy and thriving urban center.

Our K-12 public education system has many challenges still to overcome. But with the support of the American people and through our public leaders such as those of you on this Committee, it will recover. And through that recovery will come a major boost to the long-term revitalization of the city of New Orleans.